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ABSTRACT

The Regional Parenting Survey is a study of the needs and problems of parents, their sources of advice, and their awareness of local services. Randomly selected samples of parents were interviewed in five Appalachian states. A preliminary analysis is presented of 400 parents of third grade children, half living in urban counties and half in Appalachian rural counties. Results indicate that 50% of these parents expressed some type of need relative to their parental roles. There were noticeable differences between urban and rural parents. When asked about the quality of their contacts with school staff and the medical profession, parents were positive, but offered specific suggestions for improvement. Parents were unaware of the various types of programs and services available in their counties, excepting programs providing financial assistance. Seventy-seven percent of the sample agreed that "everyone needs some kind of help in rearing children." When asked to name their more important source of advice and help, the majority of parents named an informal source, a family member or friend. Yet when questions about specific situations were asked, most parents tended to say they would turn to a professional. Further analyses are planned. (Author/GK)

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A SURVEY OF PARENTING NEEDS AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

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A SURVEY OF PARENTING NEEDS

AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

There has been much concern in recent years with the role of parents in our society. Recognition of the importance of parenting and questions about the quality of parenting have been discussed by numerous scholars, educators and practitioners. While it is true that interest in parent education in some form can be traced back to colonial times (Schlossman, 1976), the current concern is a much broader one. It consists of more than disseminating information, scientific or otherwise, to interested parents. It attempts to understand the process of parenting - how it is that parents influence children, how they transmit information, values and ideas both consciously and unconsciously. The current interest also recognizes that while parents are educators of their children, these parents are also part of a larger community of education configurations (Cremin, 1979). Only by knowing the location (both physical and social) of a family can we grasp the situation and understand the needs of parents.

The current interest in parenting, in families as educators, etc., can be attributed to problems accompanying rapid social change. In the 1960's numerous factors converged (long-term economic and scientific developments, the social movements, especially the women's movement of the 1960's etc.) to bring about changes in the family and changes in attitudes toward the family. In the 1970's variations in family life styles became more prevalent and more acceptable (see Skolnick

and Scholnick, 1971). No longer was the one-breadwinner, nuclear, suburban family the ideal toward which everyone must strive. Numerous critiques outlined the strains and problems of the traditional nuclear family for women, men and children. The debate raged during the 1970's as to whether the family was a dying institution or whether it would become stronger through change. In the last few years there has been some indication of a swing back to the pre-1960's view of the nuclear family as ideal (Keniston, 1977; Rossi, 1978). At present then there is a lack of consensus regarding the state of the family and where it is headed in the future.

However, in spite of this, the fact that important changes have taken place is indisputable. These changes are expected to continue into the future (Masnick and Bane, 1980). What are major changes or trends that are noticeable in American family life today?

1. One is the large-scale entry of women into the labor force, including mothers of pre-school as well as school-age children. This occurence has been called "the most significant social phenomenon in industrial society of the mid-twentieth century" (Kamerman, 1980). Two-worker households are projected to continue to increase. And more women are expected to work full time and continuously rather than part time and intermittently.(Masnick and Bane, 1980).

2. Another trend is the increasing number of single parent families, generally female. In 1977, according to the Census Bureau, 14% of all families were one-parent, female head and 3% were one-parent, male head.

3. A third trend is the increasing divorce and remarriage rate. A growing number of children interact with two living parents and one or more stepparents (Masnick and Bane, 1980).

Whether these changes are viewed positively or negatively, it must be agreed that many parents and children are living in very different family situations than was probably true for their parents and grandparents. This is not to say that previous generations of parents did not have problems or that industrial society has not brought changing circumstances to every generation. But at this time the disjunction with the recent past is more radical than before. Therefore today's parents are likely to have very different needs and problems than previous generations.

In addition, children, particularly teenagers, now experience very different social climates in school and in the community than was true a few decades ago. High exposure to drug use and pressures to become sexually active at an early age are examples of causes of concern for many parents of teenagers.

All of these social changes result in parents being less able than ever before to raise their children as they were raised. New information, insight and understanding are sought by parents in their quest to be good parents.

At the same time community organizations have attempted to respond to the current concern by providing programs and services for families. There have been numerous efforts across the country to involve parents in schools and other child-related organizations; to prepare prospective parents; to provide for families with pressing problems (financial, health, etc.); to establish parent education courses (P.E.T., S.T.E.P., Responsive Parenting; Adlerian Parent-Study Groups, etc.); and to meet the individual needs of parents and children. The availability and comprehensiveness of such programs and services varies widely, with urban areas in general tending to provide more such services. And, in spite of some attempts

at evaluation, the effectiveness of these available programs and services is largely unknown. What additional programs and services are needed in an area is often largely a matter of speculation.

However, in spite of increased interest in the family and parenting and the emphasis on community organizational support of parents, there have been few studies which have approached the subject from the perspective of the parents themselves.*

This leads us to ask, who should identify the needs of families and determine how to best meet those needs? Should this be the province of professionals (school personnel, social service workers, physicians, etc.) or parents or both? The answer depends upon what the overall goal of programs and services for families is to be.

The following is a perspective recently voiced by Earl Schaefer at a Parenting Conference in Virginia: "A primary goal in all our professions and institutions (is that) of strengthening and supporting parenting and families as the major way of providing for the health, education and welfare of children. . . . The goal is to develop professionals who are partners, collaborators and friends of parents rather than their enemies or rescuers of children" (Schaefer, 1979).

Increasingly professionals who seek to influence children's lives agree that communication and cooperative collaboration with parents is essential. They recognize that they alone do not have all the answers,

*There are of course exceptions. Some of these are: Sheila Kamerman, Parenting in an Unresponsive Society (New York: Macmillan, 1980); Urie Bronfenbrenner and Moncrieff Cochran, The Comparative Ecology of Human Development, A Progress Report, Cornell University, February, 1979.

that there is no one solution to fit every family. Past experience in many areas has taught us that when client (parent) contact with professionals is experienced by the client as imposed and intrusive, it has a negative effect. For all these reasons professionals working with families now generally want to understand what families have to contend with in today's world, to what extent families vary by circumstance, by special needs, etc., what parents perceive as their needs and how parents prefer those needs to be met. To provide this kind of information was, in essence, the purpose of the Regional Parenting Survey.

SURVEY DESIGN

The Regional Parenting Survey was designed to find out, firsthand, from parents themselves, about their life circumstances, their needs and problems as parents and the kinds of help they would like to have made available to them. This included an investigation of family structure, of parents' sources of advice and help in child-rearing, the extent of their formal and informal social networks and their awareness and utilization of local programs and services.

The study design called for personal interviews with random samples of parents in 23 counties in the states of Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia and West Virginia. Counties were selected randomly within the major categories of Appalachian Rural, Non-Appalachian Rural and Urban. The definition of an Urban county was one in which there existed a central city of 50,000 or more which was a part of a larger SMSA.

Random samples of parents and the names of perspective local interviewers were obtained through the cooperation of the school system(s) in the selected counties. The total number of interviews planned was 1,160. The bulk of these (920) were to be interviews with the parents

of third graders. For comparison purposes 120 interviews with parents of kindergarten students and 120 interviews with parents of tenth grade students were planned. A survey of programs and services available to parents was carried out in each county just prior to the interviewing stage. This information was incorporated into the Interview Schedule.

This paper is a report of the Regional Parenting Survey in progress. Data processing is currently incomplete. Therefore, I am reporting today on the results of 400 cases, all the parents of third grade children. Two hundred of these are classified Urban and two hundred as Appalachian Rural parents. The results discussed today, therefore, are tentative and await the completion of all data processing and analysis.

This paper will focus on responses to questions dealing with parents' perceptions of their needs and their knowledge and satisfaction with community organizations and services. Particular attention will be paid to parents' contacts with the school and the medical institution.

PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF NEEDS

Parents were asked three questions concerning their perceptions of their needs as parents. The first of these was: "Do you feel you have special problems as a parent, problems that most parents do not have to face?" Slightly over one-fifth or 22% of the total sample responded "yes," that they had special problems. When responses were divided by Urban and Rural counties, it was discovered that Urban parents were much more likely to perceive themselves as having special problems as parents; 32% of the Urban sample responded "yes" compared to only 18% of the Rural sample. Parents explanations of their special problems were varied. However, the two most common responses were Problems of being

a single parent, a stepparent or an adoptive parent (25%) and Child's illness either physical or emotional (20%). Among Urban parents, the problems of being a single parent ranked first, with child's illness second; these were reversed for Rural parents. This was not surprising as our Urban sample contained more single parents than did the Rural sample.

After a statement about the many things parents need to know and learn in order to raise children, parents were asked: "Do you have any unanswered questions, something that is on your mind right now, that you would like to find out about?" Of the total sample of 400, 26% responded "yes" to this question. When examined by region, Urban parents were again found to be more likely to reply "yes" than were Rural parents (Urban 30%, Rural 24%). The types of unanswered questions were similar however among both groups. Almost one half (48%) of those responding in the affirmative had questions about Child development and/or parenting skills (e.g., "what are the stages children go through," "how to deal with children's emotions," "how to guide children, how to develop a good relationship with children," "how to know whether or not I am doing a good job as a parent"). The next most common category (29%) was School-related questions. Some of these were simply informational questions e.g., "what is offered in summer school," "what is done for gifted children." Others suggested problems, e.g., "how can we improve the school," "how can respect be developed between teachers, parents and students." Thirdly, 11% of the parents mentioned a question having to do with a Special situation, e.g., how to deal with being a single parent with full responsibility, or having a family member addicted to alcohol or drugs, or being new in the community.

The third indicator of parental perception of needs was the response to the question, "Is there any particular kind of help for parents that is not available locally, but which you feel is needed? Overall 32% of the 400 respondents replied "yes" to this question. By type of region, we found that, unlike the previous two questions, Rural parents were more likely (39%) to respond positively to this question than were Urban parents (24%). Explanations again covered a wide range of types of help. However, the highest mentions were received for Facilities and programs to help parents (23%). These included the establishment of centers for parents, hot lines, and specific kinds of help for single parents, parents of handicapped children and parents of teenagers. The next most frequently mentioned need was for Youth activities and recreation centers (15%).

An index of Perceived Needs of Parents was developed from the three questions just discussed. Respondents were rated according to the number of those questions to which they responded "yes." Thus possible scores ranged from 0 to 3. Results were as follows:

Score	Rural Parents n = 200	Urban Parents n = 200
0 (no needs expressed)	43.5%	51%
1	36 %	34%
2	18.5% 56.5%	10% 49%
3	2 %	5%

Thus, slightly more than one-half of the Rural parents and slightly less than one-half of the Urban parents responded affirmatively to one of the need indicators. However, most responded in this way to only one of the indicators. A response to one did not seem to predict the response to another.

Reviewing the most common explanations of needs provided by these three questions, the majority of them expressed a desire for information, information about child development, about parenting skills. about the school and about how to deal with special problems.

PARENTS AND THE SCHOOLS:

QUALITY OF CONTACT

Probably the single most important community organization to parents is the school system. Yet authors over a number of decades have discussed the difficulties and strains inherent in school-family relations (Waller, 1932; Lightfoot, 1978).

The Regional Parenting Survey attempted to obtain parents' perspectives on their contacts with the staff of their child's school. After some measures of quantity of contact within the past year, parents were asked how helpful their talks with teachers and other school staff had been. These responses tended to be positive.

How Helpful Were Talks With Teachers?

Very Helpful	55%
Somewhat Helpful	35%
Not at all Helpful	5%
NA, DK	5%
	100
	(n = 400)

Yet when asked if such talks could be made more helpful only 31% responded "No" 32% did not know, and 46% agreed.

Could talks with School Staff Be More Helpful:

No	31%
Yes	46%
Don't Know	22%
NA	1%
	100
	(n = 400)

Thus it is evident that, in spite of their generally positive feeling about school contacts, most parents felt there was room for improvement.

When parents were asked why they rated their talks with school staff as very, somewhat or not at all helpful, most of the responses were positive (69%), 12% were negative and the remainder declined to comment. The most frequently mentioned response was Parent gets specific information from teacher about child's work or behavior, clarification of problem, of what to do at home (29%). Next most frequently mentioned was Teacher says there is no problem, child improved after conference/ problem solved (17%).

Parents who responded "yes, that talks between parents and school staff could be more helpful were then asked how this could be done. A large variety of responses were elicited. However the highest response was that School staff should take the initiative in getting to know parents and by providing more opportunities and more time for meaningful talks (36%). For example there were specific suggestions that conferences could be held at night or in parents' homes. The next most frequent response was that Parents should show more interest in school and in child's activities, be more open to suggestions from teachers (16%). Thus it seems that these parents were also saying that good communication is a two-way street, and cannot be up to the teacher alone.

Responses to this series of questions seem to imply that while parents tend to react favorably toward the school, they are also saying that parent-teacher relations could be improved. Parents are clear about how this could be done. They want school staff to arrange meetings that are more feasible, more convenient, for parents. However, there was also

some evidence that parents realize that good communication is their responsibility also, not the teacher's alone. When they do communicate with school staff parents want specific information about their child's work and behavior. And they want results; they want to feel that any problem will improve or disappear as a result of the conference.

PARENTS AND THE MEDICAL PROFESSION; QUALITY OF CONTACT

Parents were asked the same questions about the medical profession that they had been asked about school staff.

In response to "In general, how helpful have you found your talks with doctors concerning (child's name)?", parent were even more positive than they had been about the schools.

How Helpful Were Talks with Doctors?

Very Helpful	61%
Somewhat Helpful	30%
Not Helpful at all	4%
NA	5%
	100%
	(n = 400)

However, once again a descrepancy was noticed when parents were then asked "Could talks between parents and members of the medical profession be made more helpful?" Only 30% said "No," they could not be more helpful; 36% were uncertain and answered that they didn't know; 45% agreed.

Could Talks With Medical Profession Be More Helpful?

No	30%
Yes	42%
Don't Know	26%
NA	2%
	100%
	(n = 400)

When parents were asked why they had rated their talks with doctors (regarding child) as very, somewhat or not at all helpful, the most common responses were: Gives information, answer questions, explains, tells me what to do (35%) followed by Cured illness, helped, said there was no problem. (14%).

When those who said "Yes, that talks between parents and members of the medical profession could be more helpful" were asked how this could be done, the highest responses were: Doctor should provide more information, be willing to answer questions, explain, not assume too much (29%) and Doctor should listen more, give more time, be more readily available (27%).

The results were strikingly similar for parent-medical profession contact as was true for parent-school staff contact. Parents were even more favorably disposed toward their medical contacts than toward their school contacts, but again it was very clear that most parents feel these relationships are far from ideal.

As was true with the school staff, parents want information from the medical profession. They want explanations, they want their questions answered, they want to know what they can do to help and they want results. They want the communication to help, to cure the illness, etc. And in order for this type of communication to take place, parents feel doctors must make it possible by being more readily available, by taking more time and by listening.

AWARENESS OF COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Parents were asked about four different types of programs or services for families and whether these were available in their communities. If a respondent replied "yes," she or he was then expected to provide the name or a brief description of the program or agency. During the coding procedure any agency or program mentioned by a respondent was matched with the list of local programs and services known to exist in that county.*

What is most striking about the results is that, in most cases, only a minority of respondents were familiar enough with the local programs to describe or name them. The exception was the category of programs/services "that provide assistance to families facing difficult situations, e.g., financial, health, drug abuse problems," 69% of the total parent sample were able to name or describe such a program which corresponded to one on our community survey list. However, only 36% of the respondents were familiar with programs (agencies) "that provide any kind of preparation for parenthood" 36% were familiar with programs (agencies) "that try to provide for parents' own needs, aside from their roles as parents, e.g., the development of interests, communication skills, job training" and only 17% were familiar with programs "that provide a group or service to parents who have no particular problems, but who just want to learn to be better, more effective parents."

*This information was obtained by means of a community survey of programs and services which was carried out by local interviewers prior to the interview stage. It should be noted that all four types of programs and services were represented in every county in which parents were interviewed.

AWARENESS AND FAMILIARITY WITH COMMUNITY PROGRAMS AND SERVICES

Type of Program or Service

	Provide Preparation for Parenthood	Help Families in Different Situations	Help Parents be More Effective	Provide for Parents Own Needs
Did not know; could not name or describe such a program (agency)	51%	21%	75%	52%
Named or described program (agency) which could not be matched with community survey	13%	10%	8%	12%
Named or desribed one or more programs (agencies) that could be matched with community survey	36%	69%	17%	36%
	(N = 400)	(N = 400)	(N = 400)	(N = 400)

Finally the parents who replied that they did not know whether one or more of the four types of programs were available, were asked where they could go to find out. The great majority named an agency to which they would go for information; only a small number said they would turn to a friend or family member.

Where Respondent Would Go
For Program Information

Friends, Family	5%
Agency	58%
Friend, Family and Agency	5%
Other	12%
Don't know	11%
No answer	9%
	100
	(n = 400)

When type of agency was examined, it was discovered that parents were most likely to mention the school, followed by a social service agency. The third most frequenlty mentioned source of information was the Yellow Pages; this was especially important for the Urban parents.

WHERE PARENTS TURN FOR HELP

Parents were asked whether or not they agreed that "in today's world everyone needs some kind of help in rearing children." An overwhelming majority responded "yes."

Does Everyone Need Help Raising Children?

Agree: Total 77%
Rural 74%
Urban 83%

Those who agreed were then asked to name their most important source of advice and help in rearing the sample child. By far the greatest number of replies were "own parents or in-laws." However, when viewed by region, "own parents or in-laws" were a somewhat less important source for Urban parents than they were for Rural parents while the reverse was true for

for "friends" as sources of advice.

Most Important Sources of Advice and Help

	Total	Rural	Urban
Own Parents or in-laws	37%	46%	25%
Friends, co-workers	10%	5%	17%
Spouse, self, biological parent	9%	7%	12%
Other family member	4%	4%	3%
SUBTOTAL INFORMAL	60	62	57
Prayer, Bible, church	14%	17%	10%
Child's teacher, school staff	7%	7%	6%
Doctor, pediatrician	6%	7%	5%
Family services	2%	2%	2%
Parenting class	.5	.5	--
Reading material	6%	2%	12%
SUBTOTAL FORMAL	35.5	35.5	35
No answer	5%	3%	8%

Yet when parents were presented with vignettes of specific situations commonly experienced by those engaged in child-rearing and asked where they would turn for help in these situations, most named a formal contact rather than an informal one. For a concern about their child's proper growth and development, 72% would turn first to a doctor. Likewise for a physical or health problem experienced by their child, 94% would turn first to a doctor. Responses were most varied in the case of a concern about the child's social-emotional development; however, highest number of mentions went to the school (36%). For a learning problem or a question about higher education, parents overwhelmingly said they would

turn first to the school (Learning, 92%, Higher education, 74%). Very few parents said they would turn first to an informal source of help (a family member or a friend) in these situations.

For each respondent a formal score was developed based upon the number times such a source of help and advice was mentioned in response to all five situations described. Similarly informal scores based on all five situations were developed. As can be seen in the following table, informal scores were low for both Rural and Urban parents, while formal scores were high.

Sources of Help in Response
to Specific Situation Contacts

	Formal Scores		Informal Scores	
	Low	High	Low	High
Rural	40	160	187	13
	(20%)	(80%)	(93%)	(7%)
Urban	78	122	183	17
	(39%)	(61%)	(91%)	(9%)

The seemingly contradictory nature of these results concerning where parents turn for help will require further investigation.

SUMMARY

A subsample of the Regional Parenting Survey was analyzed for this paper. The data were from 400 parent interviews, 200 in Rural Appalachian counties and 200 in Urban counties.

A significant number (approximately one-half of our sample) perceived themselves as having needs as a parent. Although some of these needs had to do with a lack of facilities (recreational, medical) most revealed parents' desire for information - information about child development, about parenting skills, about the schools, and about the special

circumstances of being a single parent or the parent of an ill or handicapped child. Urban parents were somewhat more likely to perceive themselves as having special problems as parents and to have unanswered questions in relation to parenting. However, Rural parents were more likely to feel that certain kinds of help were lacking in their communities.

Although parents tended to view the schools and the medical profession positively, it was nevertheless evident that most believed their relations with school staff and members of the medical profession could be improved. What seemed to be most important to parents was the quality and specificity of information provided by the teacher or the doctor. Also of importance was the availability of school staff or members of the medical profession to parents. Parents stressed that teachers especially should take the initiative in making parent-teacher contacts possible. Parents were interested in contacts that attain results e.e., school performance is improved, child is cured. They appeared to be very pragmatic in this regard. They want information, they want to know what they as parents can do and they want problems to be improved or solved.

Having established that many parents in our subsample perceived themselves as having needs and having looked at some of the specific needs associated with parent-school staff and parent-medical profession relations, we then turned to an examination of parents' awareness and familiarity with local community programs and services. Our data show that parents' familiarity with community programs for parents and children is largely confined to one category or type of agency, those that provide assistance to families facing difficult situations (financial, health, etc.). Only slightly over one third of the parents were aware of programs providing preparation for parenthood or programs designed to help parents

fulfill their own needs as individuals, and less than one fifth were familiar with programs for parents who are simply interested in learning to become more effective parents. If they wanted to find a type of program/service unfamiliar to them, most parents said they would turn for information to the school, a social service agency or the yellow pages.

Finally we looked at responses which indicated parents' sources of advice and help in parenting. Here we found what seem to be contradictory results. When asked to name their most important source of advice and help in rearing the sample child, the majority of parents named a family member or friend, with "own parents or in-laws" receiving the highest number of mentions. Yet when responding to descriptions of situations representing common problems faced by parents, the majority said they would turn for help to a member of a formal organization, most often a physician or a school staff person. One interpretation of these results could be that both informal and formal contacts were important to parents; but in different ways. Possibly the informal contacts are called upon for day to day support and for small problems and the formal contacts are called upon for larger, more long-term problems. A satisfactory explanation will have to await further analysis.

As was indicated earlier, this paper is a preliminary analysis of a portion of the Regional Parenting Survey data. Therefore, all results should be taken as suggestive and tentative at this stage. We expect to learn much more about parent needs and community services from future analyses.

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